STAR 160467

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Must a Spy Agency Be a 'Gentleman's Club'?

Must, or should, a nation's secret intelligence agency be a "gentleman's club"—a kind of closed circle of upper class "old boys" who hang together and maintain a snobbish clique?

In Washington, the headquarters of the CIA, this is an old but rather private question. In London, however, it is the question of the day. The papers are full of it, and full of demands for an overhaul of the British Secret Service.

All this has occurred in the wake of new revelations about Britain's super spy, Harold "Kim" Philby, who defected to Moscow in 1963 after being a double agent for both England and Russia much of his life.

Philby, now 55, went to Cambridge University, where he had a brilliant record and made friends among the elite who later rose to prominence in the government, including the British Secret Service. He was secretly recruited by the Russian secret service (KGB) shortly after graduation, and has remained loyal to the Russians for 30 years while working as a journalist and a British spy.

Philby is famous in America as the "third man" who made it possible for the late Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, then serving as British diplomats in Washington, to escape to Russia in 1951 just before they were to be arrested as Soviet spies. Years later, it was discovered that they were alerted by Philby, at that time head of the Soviet section of MI-6, which was supposed to counter Russian espionage.

When Philby defected in 1963 the British government pooh-poohed its importance on the grounds Philby was inconsequential, but it now appears the MI-6 section chief had access to all British secret data on Russia, as well as similar access to the equivalent U.S. intelligence. It is also contended that he came close to being the head of MI-6 itself.

The clamor for a housecleaning has been heightened by disclosures that Philby had marked leanings to the left even in college, and that his first wife was a full-fledged foreign Communist. It is also being asked why he was kept at MI-6 despite strong suspicions that he was the "third man" who saved Maclean and Burgess.

American intelligence has had a vivid interest in the case for years, for it was U.S. agents who discovered the duplicity of the Britishers and tipped off MI-6 about them in 1951. Moreover, as far back as 1950, the United States had tagged Maclean as a homosexual drunk while he was serving in the British Embassy at Cairo. He was sent back to London, but instead of being dismissed he was made the head of the American desk at the Foreign Office.

This has provoked what the London Telegraph calls a "wave of anti-gentleman, down-with-the-old-boy-ring, let's expose-the-Establishment fervor." In defense of the system, the Telegraph says:

"A secret body must be a co-opted one; it cannot be chosen by competitive examination. Its members must be highly educated, loyal, intelligent, ruthless, secretive and ready to be lonely. The field is at once greatly restricted; it must, in fact, be an old-boy net, like its Soviet, French and American counterparts. If it has shown a partiality for gentlemen, that is on a par with the Soviet preference for good party members.

"It should also be pointed out that the American record of defections, traitors and long-undetected spies is no less disturbing than our own."

As in England, the U.S. spy system expanded from small beginnings to a vast operation during World War II, and grew even larger during the cold war. The American old-school-tie group virtually took over the OSS, predecessor to the CIA, and has held many of the key jobs ever since.

It would be hard to prove however, that this has been against the best interests of the country. The CIA has made its mistakes, and often been in hot water, but there is no reason to believe it would have done better without the Ivy League contingent. It would not be easy to find a more conscientious and dedicated group in the entire government.